

# **Exploring the challenges for women working at a regional Australian university**

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## **Background or scope of the study**

This paper explores innovations in qualitative research, using a case study of the challenges for academic and professional women at an Australian regional university

## **Significance and aims of the research**

The paper explores whether a written response research method enables reflection, voice and agentic behaviour for women research participants.

## **Research design**

We collected the data in February 2020, just before the COVID-19 pandemic impacted on universities across Australia.

The principal researcher circulated an email inviting all women university staff to participate and provide written responses to a series of questions that examined barriers to and enablers in establishing and progressing their careers. A total of 21 women participated. Thus, the questions became prompts for self-reflection. The written responses were then formed into categories that corresponded with the questions, and data was coded within these main categories to form sub-categories and analysed.

This paper investigates if this written response method of research can be a vehicle for empowering women research participants' voice and agency - the ability to define goals and act on them.

## **Key findings**

Written accounts are an efficient means of gathering rich data and provide highly focused and reflective information. We noticed that the research participants in our study enthusiastically responded to this method. Despite heavy workloads they could answer in their own time and manner, with as much detail as they desired. Their distinctive voices were certainly apparent, especially in relation to roadblocks to their careers and the final question about suggestions for reducing barriers to women's careers. In a post-COVID-19 world, this method of written response research may be useful in encouraging participant voice and agency without the researcher directing the process.

## **Implications for further educational research**

This approach to qualitative research has considerable merit. The continuing uncertainty about lockdowns and face-to-face contact with COVID-19 means that qualitative data collection will need to investigate more flexible approaches. A written research method could save the expense and time involved in face-to-face interviewing. While the relationship between the researcher and participant is more physically distant, responses are completed privately in the respondents' own time which can result in detailed, thoughtful, personalized and insightful information that provides rich data and enables the researcher to get to know the respondents.